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RÉFÉRENCE

London : National Portrait Gallery 2010. 160 p., 113 colour illustrations.

Mark Haworth-Booth wrote his first book on Camille Silvy in 1992. He had fallen in love with the photographer's 1858 La Vallée de l'Huisne when he saw it at a British Arts Council exhibit twenty years earlier. Then, while carving out a stellar career as the photography curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, he worked to unravel the photograph's complex iconography of upper and working class types of leisure and to decipher its complicated composition of multiple negatives, its subtle retouching and hand-painted additions. His Camille Silvy, River Scene, published by the Getty, introduced a relatively obscure photographer to a broader audience. Now, almost twenty years after its publication, he has written a study of the photographer that covers Silvy's entire life and work. Enriched by new documents and over one hundred pictures, many not seen before, given to him by the photographer's descendants, this book was written to accompany the first-ever retrospective exhibition held at the National Portrait Gallery, London in Fall 2010 to celebrate the centenary of the photographer's death.

Camille Silvy came from a comfortable family – his father was the mayor of his birthplace Nogent –le-Rotrou – and his first career was as a diplomat in the French foreign office. Like many early photographers, it was his failure at drawing that made him turn to the camera for more "exact views." His first photographs, taken in 1857 when he was posted to Algeria to make images that would encourage emigration, already demonstrated an innate talent for the organization of light and shadow to suggest atmospheric effects. His return to France found him perfecting his technique under the direction of Count Olympe Aguado whose inventive pictures of animals and original portraits and landscape views Silvy emulated.

In 1859, Silvy moved to London to take over the photographic studio of Caldesi and Montecchi at 38 Porchester Terrace, a house still standing in Bayswater on the north side of Hyde Park. He brought with him a talent for portrait photography, especially carte de visites– a craze that had taken off in Paris, but had only just begun in London. He was an excellent businessman, keeping meticulous daybooks (the twelve surviving are owned by the National Portrait Gallery), that logged a copy of each commission and documentation of sales. His clients were the beau and demi monde of London: aristocrats and their children, servants and horses, actors, musicians and opera singers. Members of the exiled French Royal Family brought their custom to him. Prince Albert and other members of Queen Victoria's household also sat to Silvy as did such exotic subjects as the queen of the Sandwich Islands - now Hawaii - and Queen Victoria's African goddaughter. His business took off immediately. At its height in the mid 1860s, C. Silvy & Co. employed 40 workers and produced over 700,000 thousand cartes a year. Silvy himself was said to handle one portrait sitting every 12 minutes. These portraits, as Haworth-Booth describes them, were not overtly original but they were authentic, staged in innovative ways to convey spontaneity and a sense of natural bearing as well as show off the latest fashions, for both men and women.

Haworth-Booth explains Silvy's working methods in exhaustive detail and gives a fascinating analysis of his technical mastery – the workings of the studio, use of props and backgrounds, his cameras and the way that he worked with them. He also shows that Silvy's cartes of celebrities – he sold 20 thousand of soprano Adelina Patti alone and had the good sense to copyright many of the most popular - were only one part of this enterprising photographer's activities. He also made photographic facsimiles of illuminated manuscripts and photographed works of art, produced photo-enamel cameos, established the London Photographic Review, a journal that featured his large format photographs, and invented a cartouche photographique – a camera that provided a 360º panorama on a paper negative - to photograph battlefields.

Surprisingly, the end of that successful business came just ten short years after it began. Haworth-Booth suggests that underlying reasons included the decline of the carte market as well as the photographer's ill health. Silvy closed his studio in 1868, going to work first for the French Government as vice-consul in Exeter and then returning to his homeland to fight in the war with Prussia, ultimately appointed Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur for his bravery and service. But by this time, perhaps because of the war, his "periods of exhaustion" noted by Nadar in his Quand jétais photographe had developed into full-blown psychosis. In 1878, after a short term in jail after a fight, he was committed to psychiatric asylums for the last 30 years of his life, dying unknown in 1910.

1

As the title of this new book makes clear, Haworth-Booth holds Silvy to be the delineator of the 'fugitive fleeting beauty of present-day life' defined by Baudelaire as the essence of modern life. He justifies his claim not just with Silvy's skill at presenting "modern people as themselves" – a rare accomplishment at this time - but also by weaving the photographer and his subjects into London life and literature in the 1860s. He connects the photographer's subjects and style to such contemporary writers such as Dickens, Trollope (Haworth-Booth points out a Silvy subject who wears the new 'tangled hair' style described by Trollope in The Last Chronicle of Barset) and Willkie Collins who lived

not far from Silvy's studio . He shows how Silvy captures the urban spectacle that was the English metropolis at the height of empire, illustrating the fabric of London life : the illumination of its gas lamps, multiplication of signage, the proliferation of newspapers and posters, the stratified society of colonial subjects, upper and lower classes. Silvy's three large albumen prints "Fog," "Sun" and "Twilight" (all 1859) which make up the series Studies of Light are heavily manipulated to portray the effects of weather and atmosphere in the city. In two of the three, the subjects are outsiders – itinerant musicians and an Indian sweeper. In the third, made up of four negatives, a man and boy stand alone in the foreground of an empty damp stand under a gas lamp. With its blurred figure in the foggy background, whether approaching or receding is not clear (Haworth-Booth suggests that this is 'probably the first intentional use of blur in the history of photography'), it is a convincing portrayal of the alienating emptiness of the modern metropolis.

2

Haworth-Booth's perceptive analysis of Silvy - and by extension mid nineteenth century photography itself – as a productive conflation of art and industry, allows Haworth-Booth to find parallels with our own time. Silvy's audacious manipulations he says, 'anticipate the digital age' while his industrial portrait production finds it way into albums that were 'the the social networking site of their time.' This handsome book, the result of 's enduring passion for his subject, has produced a tribute to Camille Silvy and a gift to the history of photography.